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(L) POLITICAL DYNAMICS IN
THE SULTANATE OF OMAN

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by

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(1)

October 1974

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HIS MAJESTY SULTAN QABUS BIN SA'ID

SULTAN OF OMAN

POLITICAL DYNAMICS IN THE SULTANATE OF OMAN

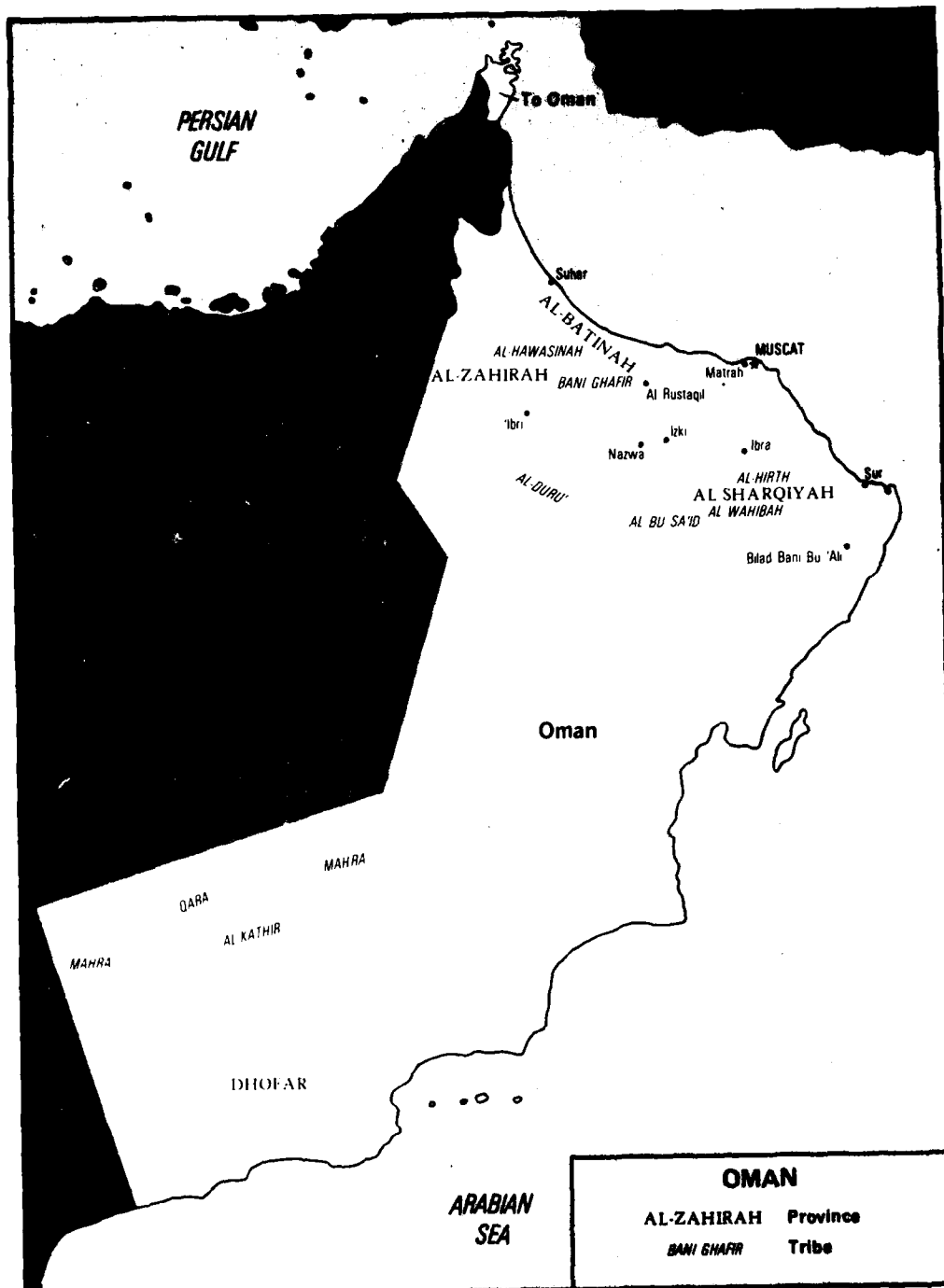
Preface

The Sultanate of Oman is one of the oldest yet least known of the Arab countries. In recent years, however, the discovery of oil and the nine-year-old insurgency in the southern province of Dhufar have increasingly engaged the attention of the outside world. While a growing amount of information is available on oil production, the insurgency, and also on the government's commitment to rapid social and economic development, numerous areas of Omani national life remain terra incognita to the outside observer. This is especially the case with the country's political dynamics. In focusing on this topic, this study highlights the position and role of nearly a dozen interest groups that compete with one another to influence the political process. The research reported is based on field work carried out by the writer in Oman during 1971 and 1974.

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SOCIAL STRATIFICATION AND THE POLITICAL STRUCTURE

Omani society is comprised of a number of distinct groups. At the top is the ruler and ruling family. Next in line are a group of expatriates in key positions followed by the merchants and prominent commoner families, the military, the tribes and their shaykhs, the students and intelligentsia, the religious establishment, leaders of various minority communities (many of whom are scattered across several categories within the elite structure) and former slaves in the service of the previous Sultan. Each of these groups is acknowledged locally to be of higher social status than the non-elites, who can be identified as mainly the unskilled and semi-skilled workers in the labor force.

The elite groups not only represent the sources and aggregation of much political power; by their composition and basic interests they also determine to a substantial degree the nature of the political competition that takes place, what issues are presented for resolution by the government's decision-makers, and the sources and direction of various pressures for change within the political system.

The Sultan and the Royal Family

Qabus bin Sa'id bin Taymur is the fourteenth ruler in the Al Bu Sa'id dynasty which came to power in the mid-eighteenth century. The thirty-two year-old Sultan, while permitting much more social and economic freedom than did his father, Sa'id bin Taymur (r. 1932-1970), has retained his traditional, absolute authority as head of state. The structure of government remains essentially authoritarian and

paternalistic.

Sultan Qabus is one of the more enigmatic heads of state in the Arab world. Although an absolute ruler in the traditional sense, he was educated at Sandhurst and was commissioned and actually served in the British Army of the Rhine. Yet he acceded to the rulership with no previous government experience whatsoever, having been kept under house arrest in Salalah by his father for the five years immediately preceding the July 1970 coup which placed Qabus on the throne.

Despite the fact that he was not permitted to acquire any administrative skills under his father, Sultan Qabus has demonstrated a good capacity for leadership, and there is little doubt as to his general popularity among the population at large. Much of his popularity can be attributed to his terminating numerous repressive economic and social restrictions associated with the era of his father in whose reign Oman remained virtually a medieval state. Of related importance, however, has been Qabus' greater accessibility, visibility and activity and the apparent sincerity of his commitment to press ahead with social and economic development. Boosted by phenomenal increases in the country's wealth through oil revenues within a year of his coming to power, he has received most of the credit for the development programs which those increases helped to make possible. *

Next to the Sultan himself, about twenty members of the ruling family are acknowledged to be politically and socially prominent.

*In 1974 government revenues from oil are expected to exceed \$1 billion.

They include the Sultan's uncle, Tariq bin Taymur; Sayyid Thuwayni bin Shihab, cousin of Qabus who is Personal Advisor to the Sultan and Wali (Governor) of the Capital area; Sayyid Hamad bin Hamud, Minister of Diwan Affairs; Sayyid Faysal bin 'Ali, Minister of Education; and Sayyid Fahd, Minister of Information. In addition, about a dozen walis -- nearly a third of the total -- are close relatives of the Sultan and are also influential. These walis are assigned to many of the more strategically important areas in the country (e.g. Sur, Muscat - Mattrah, Khasab, Nizwa, Suhar, Izki, Bilad Bani Bu 'Ali, etc.).

Of these, Tariq bin Taymur and Thuwayni bin Shihab are the most influential. Tariq is the only member of the royal family to have fought against the Imam of Oman's insurgent rebellion in the 1950s. As a result he is much more widely known and respected in the interior of the country than most members of the family including, in the eyes of some Omanis, even his nephew, the Sultan. He is, in addition, controversial for other reasons. During the first year following the coup, Sayyid Tariq was known to favor not only the adoption of a written constitution but also the eventual establishment of a republic, having stated that, in his view, a sultanate is institutionally anachronistic and ill-suited to Oman's needs. More recently, however, he has acknowledged the need for continued rule by the Sultan as being in Oman's best interests for some time yet to come.

Sayyid Thuwayni, who is considerably younger than Sayyid Tariq, holds more prestigious positions of authority in the government and is more closely identified with development issues. As Wali of the

Capital area and a prominent member of the Supreme Development Council (chaired by the Sultan), he is connected with both the merchants and the embryonic but growing class of politically important technocrats centered in the capital, Musqat (Muscat) and its sister city, Muttrah. In addition, Sayyid Thuwayni serves as Acting Sultan during the ruler's absences from the country. Despite these positions of political power, it is generally considered that to avoid a contest between Thuwayni and Tariq over who would succeed Qabus as ruler (no Crown Prince has been named), Thuwayni would step aside.

The absence of a designated Crown Prince has created an air of uncertainty among the ruling family, however. The succession issue is all the more important because the Sultan has no brothers, is thus far without a potential heir of his own, and to date has refused either to honor or legally dissolve an engagement contracted for him in April 1970 by his father. Until the Sultan takes a bride and produces a son, or formally designates an heir apparent, speculation will continue to center on the relative merits and demerits of various members of the family to succeed him.

The Expatriate Elite

A small group of expatriates, many of them British, are in key positions and exert considerable influence in Oman. The most important serve in the national defense and internal security forces, the economic secretariat, the petroleum industry, the currency authority, and the several ministries and departments concerned with development. The expatriates' influence on the political process continues to be justified in the Sultan's eyes by their loyalty and effectiveness,

although he is under strong pressure, both at home and abroad, to be rid of them. Having held a quasi-protectorate status in Oman in years past, the British still provide key personnel to the Sultan's government, and the British Ambassador is the doyen and most important figure of the small but growing diplomatic corps in the capital. In addition to major civil and military posts, British expatriates are employed by a number of UK-based banks and construction firms that are centrally involved in the country's development process. Still other British nationals hold high posts in Petroleum Development Oman (PDO), the sultanate's only producing company to date, although the firm's general manager is Swiss and there are numerous Dutch, German and some American employees.

In at least four fields, the number of American expatriates has increased substantially. As of mid-1974 Americans had been contracted to manage the new international harbor at Muttrah and the new international airport at Sib, were foremost in the effort to develop the country's fishing industry, and an American held the post of Petroleum Adviser to the Sultan. Americans are the most important expatriate group in the field of health services, as they have been for more than half a century. In the past year, some two dozen Peace Corps volunteers have taken up posts as teachers, nurses, laboratory technicians and agricultural extension agents in development centers spread throughout the country. Finally, a fairly large number of Americans are actively seeking ways to improve various aspects of the country's largely subsistence-level agriculture and, in partnership with a Canadian company, have made important discoveries of

non-petroleum minerals at several places in the interior.

There are also many Arab expatriates scattered throughout the bureaucracy. The most prominent are the Egyptians, Saudis, Jordanians, Lebanese and Sudanese. The Jordanians and Egyptians are particularly numerous in the educational system; they staff many of the schools that have been established in the interior since the coup. The Lebanese and Sudanese serve mainly as legal advisers and as administrative specialists in various government departments. In addition, a substantial number of doctors and nurses have been recruited from the Indian subcontinent to help administer the public health facilities that have been extended to the rural areas in the past few years.

The Merchants

Among the various indigenous interest groups, the most politically influential outside the ruling family are probably the merchants. Owing to the booming economy in the capital since the coup, the range of activities in which the merchants are engaged has broadened considerably. In the process, their profits have soared. Altogether there are about a dozen prominent businessmen. These merchants are centered in the Musqat-Muttrah area where they dominate the non-oil sectors of the economy through quasi-monopolistic franchises which enable them to supply goods and services to the government, the petroleum industry, and local contractors and consumers.

Among the more prestigious commercial houses are the 'Ali Sultans, the Khimji Ramdases, the Bahwans, the Zawawis, the Makkis, the Gordandases, the 'Abd Allah Rahmans, the Al Asfoors, the Darwishes, the 'Abd al-Rahims, and the Zubairs. Nearly all these families were

well-established during the time of Sa'id bin Taymur, to whom they lent money and performed other services in exchange for special privileges. Their pre-eminent status has remained intact. As a result, through import licensing arrangements with foreign companies they effectively control most of the lucrative distributorships for both capital and consumer goods. In addition, they have won the lion's share of the contracts for supplying expatriate firms engaged by the government to develop the country's infrastructure.

Almost all foreign businesses in Oman work through one or more of the above-named family firms. Thus far entry into this select circle of merchants has been restricted not so much by the need for capital as by the political influence their companies have amassed: each of the larger ones, for example, has a contact within the Palace Diwan who looks after its interests. Of considerable political significance is the fact that of the ten most prominent mercantile families listed above, none are Ibadhi Muslims -- the major Islamic sect in Oman.* Khimji Ramdas is Hindu, the Bahwans and the Zubairs are Sunni, and the rest are Shia.

The Military

The national defense and internal security forces obviously are among the most important interest groups, owing to their monopoly over the state instruments of coercion and control. It was the military that played a crucial role in bringing the present Sultan to power.

*An offshoot of the Khariji sect and separate from Sunni and Shia Islam.

Moreover, until the recent four-fold increase in government revenues due to rises in the price of oil in the last year, military spending accounted for sixty percent of all budgetary appropriations.

Although it exceeds other organized groups in sheer numbers and power, the military's participation in central government affairs and political decision-making thus far has been limited mainly to providing support for the regime and, for nine years now, waging a counter-insurgency war against rebels in the southeastern province of Dhufar. There is no indication at the present time that the military aspires to a more active political role or that it would oppose any major policy initiated by the Sultan.

The principal reason for the military's relatively apolitical posture is its largely expatriate and mercenary composition. Although many expatriates went into retirement or were transferred elsewhere after the 1970 coup, the predominantly foreign makeup of the defense forces has continued. British officers and NCOs on secondment or private contract dominate the key command posts assisted by Pakistani junior officers and a smaller number of Arab and Baluch Omanis as well as non-Omani Baluchis. Baluchis also make up a large proportion of the ranks. In addition, there are some 1,500 Iranians fighting in Oman as part of a foreign support group that also includes a Jordanian training detachment.

Because of their widely disparate ethnic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds, the country's soldiery shows no signs of becoming a "nationalist" force and the non-Omani citizenship of those who occupy the key command posts augurs against the emergence in the foreseeable

future of a "free officers movement" akin to that in other Arab countries.* This situation will undoubtedly change as current efforts to Arabize and Omanize the defense forces begin to bear fruit. The process is expected to be a lengthy one, however.

The main communication channel between the government and the military is the ruler himself, who, in his capacity as chief of state, head of government, minister of defense and commander in chief of the armed forces, is the representative of the military in political and governmental circles. The Sultan delegates responsibility for the day-to-day administration of the defense forces to senior British expatriates on secondment from the UK Ministry of Defense. The commander of the 12,000 - man Sultan's Armed Forces (SAF), the principal fighting unit, holds the important post of Defense Secretary. In addition to directing SAF operations, the Defense Secretary oversees and coordinates the activities of the Sultan of Oman's Navy (SON), and the Sultan of Oman's Air Force (SOAF), all of which are responsible for defending the state against external attack.

The Tribes

Tribes are the basic socio-political units to which Omanis for centuries have looked for the preservation of order and the resolution

*On the other hand, although one would not expect foreign soldiers to form a "Free Officer Corps", it will be recalled that British officers played a vital role in the 1970 coup d'etat by which Sa'id bin Taymur was ousted from power. In short, had the present ruler not obtained in advance the consent of key figures in the Sultan's Armed Forces high command -- comprised at the time of British expatriates -- it is highly unlikely that the coup would have occurred.

of conflict. There are hundreds of tribes and sub-tribes scattered across the sultanate. Each of them is a political party in microcosm and capable, like all the other interest groups, of uniting for common action. For most of the populace, tribal affiliation is an important badge of identification signifying their membership in the wider society and providing prima facie evidence of the right to citizenship.

A number of tribes have long been acknowledged as politically decisive to the continuity of Al Bu Sa'id rule. Among the most influential are the dynasty's own tribe (of the same name), the Bani Ghafir, Bani 'Amr and Hawasina in Inner Oman and elsewhere; the Shihuh and Habus, which are the major tribes of the Musandam Peninsula; the Janabah which are paramount in Sur and Masirah Island -- location of an important RAF installation; the Duru in the Dhahira region (see map); the Al Kathir, Mahra and Qara (plu.: Qarawi) of Dhufar Province; and the Al Hirth in the Sharqiyva. The importance of these and other tribes is usually attributable to a combination of one or more of the following factors: size, geographical location, form of livelihood, character and orientation of leadership, and religious affiliation. Another factor is identification with one side or the other in a fundamental genealogical cleavage that divides practically the entire tribal population -- the split between the Ghafiri (alternately Adnani or Nizari) faction and the Binnawi (alternately Qahtani or Yamani) faction. This split polarized the tribes during a civil war in the eighteenth century.

That the size of a tribe is not always directly relevant to its

actual political power is exemplified by the Al Bu Sa'id, from which come the ruler and nearly a third of the country's walis. The Al Bu Sa'id number less than 2,000; a dozen or more tribes are larger. Similarly, the importance of the Bani Ghafir, Bani 'Amr and Hawasina stems less from their numbers than their position as three of the most militarily powerful tribes and -- of crucial importance in determining their past and present political role -- their reputation as the most fiercely loyal of any tribes to the Sultan. In recognition of these two traits, members of these tribes form a substantial segment among the askars (soldiers) who constitute a type of Pretorian guard for the ruling family and its representatives at government posts throughout the country.

The Shihuh and Habus on the strategically important Musandam Peninsula have traditional ties with the neighboring United Arab Emirate shaykhdoms of Ras al-Khaymah and Fujayrah. A number of these tribesmen have recently accepted Ras al-Khaymah's offer of citizenship, much to the embarrassment of the Sultan who is endeavoring to develop this long neglected area. Significantly, the Dhufar insurgents have successfully managed to smuggle arms and recruit tribesmen both in Musandam and among the Janabah tribes in Sur.

The significance of the Duru derives partly from geographic factors -- the Duru occupy the pre-eminent position among the tribes of the Dhahirah, the region where the country's oil fields are located. It stems also, however, from their support of the Sultan at a crucial time in the 1950s when serious oil exploration began in the area. Their loyalty to the Sultan both then and subsequently has helped

to make possible the comparatively stable climate in which the country's oil industry -- the principal source of government revenue -- functions to this day.

The importance of the three Dhufari tribes cited is attributable partly to their size -- they constitute the three widest political associations in the province. It stems also, however, from their strategic geographical location along the coastal plains and on the mountains where a costly guerrilla war aimed at toppling the regime is still being waged. In addition to their numbers and territorial position, they are important for still other reasons. Owing to their ancestral origins, substantial segments of two of them -- the Mahra and the Al Kathir -- are distinguished by the fact that much of their cultural orientation is directed not towards Musqat but rather in the direction of the Fourth, Fifth and Sixth Governates of the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY). The third Dhufari tribe -- the Qara -- is of added significance because of its non-Arab ethnic background, the reputation of its men as formidable fighters and the fact that the Sultan's mother, an important force in ruling family circles, is one of its more prominent members. For these reasons, there is a strong element of tribal irredentism in the Dhufar insurgency quite apart from other political and ideological considerations.

The significance of the Al Hirth stems primarily from the political orientation of its leadership. The Hirth have long been the most important tribe in the Sharqiyya, a sizeable territory that extends southeast of Musqat to Ja'alan (see map). For decades the

Hirth's tamimah (paramount shaykh) was Shaykh Ahmad bin Muhammad. So powerful was his position -- his leadership was accepted by most of the other tribes in the area, including the Al Wahiba, whose numerical strength was actually much greater -- that Sa'id bin Taymur granted a measure of local autonomy to the region as a whole under Ahmad's aegis. The quid pro quo for this arrangement was Ahmad's promise to come to the aid of the Sultan in time of trouble.

As a measure both of his respect for Shaykh Ahmad's position and his own desire to consolidate the alliance, Sa'id bin Taymur contracted an engagement between his only son, Qabus, and Ahmad's daughter in April 1970. Four months later, however, one of Qabus's first acts upon overthrowing his father and assuming power himself was to place Shaykh Ahmad under house arrest. His fiancée, who to this day he has never seen, reportedly still waits for him in Qabil, the Al Hirth's capital.

The Sultan's refusal to honor the engagement contract is of considerable political importance in the sultanate. Many among the Al Hirth resent the fact that the Sultan has refused to live up to the contract to marry the daughter of their Shaykh. Although this is a destabilizing factor in Omani politics, some observers argue that given the Sultan's commitment to the ideal of a unitary state, the power of the Al Hirth -- a tribe which supported the cause of the irredentist Imam of Oman during the 1950s and 1960s -- would have had to be broken sooner or later in any event. The continued detention of Shaykh Ahmad and the Sultan's refusal to honor the engagement constitute perhaps the best example of how a prominent and proud tribe that until quite

recently was one of the most important in the country has had its overall position in the political structure diminished considerably.

The tribal shaykhs play a role well beyond merely enhancing tribal identification. The influence of the shaykhs derives largely from their role as the main channel of communication between the authorities and the country's hundreds of thousands of tribesmen. Though considerable status and authority are thereby bestowed upon them, their influence seldom extends beyond the geographical locus of the tribe itself. Whether the tribe is settled or nomadic and regardless of whether its lands are strategically important or not, the shaykhs are politically subordinate to the wali(s) in whose districts they and their fellow tribesmen reside.

Affecting the power of all tribal leaders since the coup has been the growing impact of the central authority on traditional tribal autonomy, on the one hand, and the effect of a rapidly expanding national economy, on the other. The first factor is manifested by the development programs and bureaucratic machinery of the capital and the wil'ayas (governates) drawing the tribes and their leaders ever closer into the government's orbit. The second is evidenced by the growing numbers of Omanis migrating away from the interior (and from the authority of their chiefs) to the urban centers of the capital territory where wage employment is to be found.

Although it is too early to discern the ultimate impact of these two phenomena on the political roles of individual tribes and their shaykhs, there is little doubt that the traditional polarity

between the capital and the countryside -- indeed, between the coastal and interior regions in general -- is being blurred in the process; in its place new links between these areas are beginning to emerge. The shaykhs, moreover, appear to be unable or unwilling to reverse this trend that is, among other things, relegating more and more of them to a lower echelon -- and, increasingly, a relatively passive role -- within the overall political structure. Should the present trend continue, the goal of integrating within a generation all the tribes into the unitary state structure envisioned by the government would seem to have a good chance of success.

Although the influence of tribal leaders on national issues has declined considerably in the last decade, they are still very important in the interior, particularly in local matters. At the village level the shaykhs are the figures most directly involved in administering tribal affairs. In this capacity their main functions, as has been the case for centuries, are to arbitrate internal disputes -- usually involving questions of land, water or animals (traditionally the three main sources of income for most of the sultanate's tribes) -- and to serve in a liaison capacity with the central, regional (wilaya) and local branches of government. Central or regional government officials -- usually a wali or a qadhi but in some of the larger settled areas increasingly a representative of the health and education ministries as well -- customarily take care to intrude as little as possible into a tribe's domestic affairs. This gives the shaykhs a considerable degree of independence from government control or supervision.

Student Groups and the Intelligentsia

Although the country as a whole is lacking in a well-organized network of social institutions beyond family and tribe, this is becoming less and less the case with respect to the sultanate's school-age population. Sultan Qabus has on numerous occasions demonstrated his recognition of the need for organized youth groups and, in particular, of the need for student support for the government's development programs. At the time of the coup there were only three schools in the country -- two in the capital and one in Salalah -- none of which offered courses above the intermediate level. The subsequent emergence of a sizeable and increasingly politically aware class of organized youth is thus still a very recent phenomenon. As a result, it is still too early to predict its ultimate impact on the nature or direction of Omani politics.

However, the growing number of students which now exists at all levels already shows signs of an increasing capacity to organize itself. A large segment of the students, for example, participates in the numerous youth clubs that have sprung up in nearly every population center of significance in the sultanate. There are currently about 40 such clubs, down from more than 100 during the 1970-72 period due to a series of government-encouraged mergers in the past two years. Each of the clubs is under the general supervision of the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs, which provides various forms of financial aid in support of club activities.

In addition to students, the country's native intelligentsia (a category that to some extent overlaps with the merchants and other

prominent commoners) consists, on the one hand, of the traditional poets, historians and religious scholars associated with the Ibadhi stronghold of Nizwa and other centers and, on the other hand, of the growing number of Omanis educated abroad who have returned to the country since the coup. Members of the latter group are far more influential politically than the tradition-oriented element in the first category. Many of them received a secondary education in such places as East Africa, Aden, Bahrain, Kuwait and Qatar or its equivalent from service in the old Trucial Oman Scouts. A dozen or so, including several members of the Council of Ministers, attended universities in Iraq, Egypt, Lebanon, the UK and the USSR.

Other Groups

Other important interest groups are the religious establishment, a number of leading commoner families, prominent members of the various minority communities, and a fairly large number of ex-slaves formerly in the service of Sa'id bin Taymur. The largest and most geographically diffuse of the four is clearly the religious establishment. The relatively low position of the religious elites in the political structure stems partly from the religious heterogeneity of the population as a whole. For example, although many Omanis, including the ruling family, are Ibadhi Muslims, substantial segments of the population, including those inhabiting some large and very important areas of the country, are not. The population of Dhufar province

(a third of the country in terms of territory) is Sunni, as is the Omani enclave in the Musandam Peninsula, the Buraymi Oasis and its immediate environs, much of the Sharqiyya and Ja'alan regions and beyond as far as Sur, and the Arabian Sea islands; in addition, many other citizens, especially in the capital and along the Batinah Coast, are Shia.

Outside the ruling household there are about twenty prominent commoner families. Most of these families derive their influence through association with the various merchant groups discussed earlier. As is the case with the merchant groups, many of these families are of non-Arab origins. In addition relatively few of them are Ibadhis or maintain ties of any significance with the tribal populations of the interior. Many of them identify with the ethnic and sectarian concerns of the sultanate's numerous minority communities.

The three most important minorities are the Indians, Pakistanis and Baluch. The first two include merchants, skilled artisans, soldiers, and a wide range of civilian employees in the bureaucracy. The latter group includes relatively few businessmen but considerably more soldiers, farmers, fishermen and semi-skilled and unskilled laborers.

Among the most influential and visible of these minority groups are those who trace their ancestral origins to India. While there are Goan and Keralan Christians,¹ Sikhs² and Hindus (Banians)³ among them,

¹The Goans generally work as middle echelon clerks in businesses and banks, although a few are tailors and domestic servants.

²The Sikhs are employed almost exclusively in such skilled capacities as carpenters, machinists and electricians.

³The Hindus ("Banians") constitute one of the oldest Indian sub-groups. Nearly all are merchants. The community is served by a religious temple in Musqat and another in Muttrah.

the largest and most diversified element are Indian Muslims. Most of the latter in the sultanate originate from the pre-1948 State of Hyderabad (now part of Andhra, Bombay and Mysore states). Of the numerous sub-national Indian groups in Oman, the "Hyderabadis" are closest to the Pakistantis in attitudes and values.

The majority of the Indians in the sultanate are not businessmen but clerks in businesses run by others and in the government. Major exceptions are the Gordandas and Khimji Ramdas families, who operate lucrative import businesses. At one time, the latter family had the sole right to establish business enterprises outside the capital area and for many years had a monopoly on the water resources of Sur, the port and most important commercial center in the Sharqiyya region.

The slaves of former Sultan Sa'id bin Taymur have undergone the most profound transformation of any group in the sultanate since the coup. Though now freed, many members of this group, much like manumitted slaves in other societies, have elected to live in the shadow of the new Sultan. Sultan Qabus has given favored treatment to this group, which altogether numbers probably two thousand or so, through gifts of money and presents (including automobiles) and continued retention of them in his palace entourage and among his personal bodyguards. In the words of one local observer: "the ex-slaves have become 'la creme de la creme'."

THE INSTITUTIONAL SETTING

As an absolute monarchy, Oman has no legislature. The Sultan relies heavily on advisers who for the most part are members of the Council of Ministers (cabinet), the body responsible for executing his decisions. In addition, his uncle, Tariq bin Taymur, is often close at hand for consultation. Nevertheless, mindful of the risk of being overshadowed by other personalities, the Sultan serves as his own premier as well as defense, finance and foreign minister, thereby reserving for himself the most important positions of power in the government.

One institution common in other traditional Arab monarchies which Oman does not have is a public royal majlis, or open forum where citizens can petition the ruler. In Oman the institution of a majlis fell into disuse after 1958, when Sa'id bin Taymur left Musqat for Salalah and thereafter shut himself off from most of his subjects. While it is not clear why the present Sultan has not revived the institution, the allegedly introverted nature of his personality may be a factor together with his awareness that, with an internal war under way, an open majlis would increase the possibility of an assassination attempt.

The Sultan has been urged to meet more frequently with local leaders, especially those in the interior. In the four years since he came to power, he has travelled into the interior only twice. It has been suggested that he invite several prominent figures -- e.g., a tribal shaykh, a religious leader and a teacher, merchant or

scholar -- from each of the country's important regions to the capital for consultation each month. His advisers believe that were he to initiate such a practice, his oft-stated goals of encouraging rapid social and economic development and inculcating a spirit of national unity would stand a much better chance of realization. As evidence of some success in this direction, a number of Omanis in 1974 seemed pleased that during the previous year the Sultan for the first time spent more days in the capital territory than in remote Dhufar, his birthplace and boyhood home, and the seat of his father for most of the latter's reign.

In the absence of a majlis, the most effective channel of communication between the Sultan and the people in the capital is the Palace Diwan or "royal court". The Sultan considers the Diwan as a major forum in which citizen complaints against the government can be looked into and settled. Essentially two types of petitioners tend to use this medium in an effort to influence government decision-makers: the poor and the relatively prestigious. In mid-1974 the poor, at least in terms of appearances, were by far the more numerous. On any given day some fifty or more persons from this category can be seen waiting outside to gain entrance to the Diwan. The prestigious group often includes tribal shaykhs and religious leaders from the interior, but of greater importance and number are individuals with ties to the merchant communities of Musqat and Muttrah.

Table No. 1:-

Ministry of Diwan Affairs of the Sultanate of Oman

H. M. Sultan Qabus

Hamad bin Hamud

Head of the Royal Diwan and Secretary of
the Council of Ministers

Maqbul Hamid

Deputy Minister of Diwan Affairs

Hafiz Salim Press Adviser	Suhayr al-Jamali Administrative Director	Muhammad Sa'd Director of the Diwan for Employee Affairs	'Ali Muhammad al-Jamali Protocol Depart- ment
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Communication between the capital and outlying regions is conducted mainly through walis appointed by the Sultan upon recommendation of the Minister of Interior and Justice. The 37 walis (one for each wilaya) and an indeterminate number of na'ib (deputy) walis are the principal links between the Sultan and the majority of the population which lives beyond the Musqat-Muttrah area. The size of territory or population over which a wali exercises jurisdiction varies considerably -- from a single settlement to a collection of villages and Bedouin grazing lands spread over a wide area. Most walis in Inner Oman, the Dhahirah, the Sharqiyya and along the Batinah, administer extensive districts. In an effort to involve citizens more directly in the development process the Sultan has recently agreed to the establishment of a new political forum: town councils (majlis baladiyya). Such councils have been set up in the capital territory and in Suhar, Nizwa, Ibri, Ibra and Salalah. In most instances thus far the members who were self-appointed or elected to these councils have been traditional

figures such as tribal shaykhs and/or members of prominent merchant families. Although it is too early to discern whether these councils will provide a nucleus for greater political participation, it is clear that they constitute still another setting, though new and untested, in which political evolution is taking place. At the present time the mandate of the councils is restricted to rendering advice to municipality and other local officials appointed by the Ministry of Development.

In addition to the institutions noted above there are innumerable tribal councils (majlis shu'ukh) located throughout the country. These traditional bodies, comprised of shaykhs and venerated elders, remain an important source of conflict resolution in intratribal disputes at the local level. Most political disputes in the interior are usually referred first to such councils. While the councilmen pride themselves on their ability to mediate between opposing clans and individuals within the tribe, a qadhi (Islamic judge) trained in Islamic law (shari'a) may become involved if the dispute is one that must be settled in accordance with the shari'a.

A qadhi is assigned to each wali. Most disputes referred to a qadhi deal with questions of personal status, such as marriage, divorce and inheritance rights, or involve conflicting claims to land and water rights. On a national scale the judicial branch of government is embodied in a Ministry of Interior and Justice and a Council of Qadhis. Resident in the capital for some years, the latter body is the principal channel of communication between the Sultan and the religious establishment as a whole. Comprised of senior religious

leaders of the Ibadhi sect, to which the dynasty itself subscribes, the Council's primary function is to advise the ruler on Islamic affairs in general and, in particular, on whether individual decrees conform to the shari'a.

There is as yet neither a constitution nor an organic code in Oman, and, with the exception of the town councils, most of the above-mentioned institutions are carryovers from the pre-1970 period. It will take time for the regime to develop a more modern set of institutional arrangements. In the meantime, the interplay among the various interest groups within the traditional society plus a small group of expatriates will continue to dominate Oman's political dynamics.